

# **Making Sense of Foster Care: An Evaluation of Family Group Decision Making in Kent County, Michigan**

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## **Research Problem**

This is an evaluation of one community's efforts to develop an approach to placing children with relatives, based on a process called Family Group Decision Making (FGDM). The focus of FGDM is a plan for the care and protection of the children developed through a meeting of the children's extended family in cases of child abuse and neglect. This study considers the challenges of using FGDM to place children with extended family compared with regular foster care placement services. A framework from organizational theory was used to structure the study. By interrupting regular child welfare practice and trying something new, social workers may develop a new collective sense of the problem, a process Weick (1995) calls *sensemaking*. Weick suggests that ambiguous problems require more face-to-face meetings. He describes these meetings as opportunities where the participants can "argue, using rich data pulled from a variety of media, to construct fresh frameworks of action-outcome linkages that include their multiple interpretations" (Weick, 1995, p. 186). An FGDM meeting, where family members and child welfare professionals develop a plan for the care and protection of children, is a child welfare application of Weick's suggestion.

## **Research Background, Questions and Hypotheses**

This evaluation analyzes 593 referrals to an FGDM program that were received from 1996-2000. Of these 593 referrals, 173 had a family meeting. This study includes information about which families were selected for FGDM, which families decided to try FGDM, and whether they developed plans for keeping children out of foster care. The first three years of referrals were followed for two years to evaluate the outcomes of the program. The analysis follows a series of four research questions:

Of the referrals made to the FGDM program, what were the differences between cases that the referring Children's Protective Services Specialist, the FGDM staff, and the Family Court Referee *all agreed* were appropriate for the FGDM program and those that were not considered appropriate?

Of the referrals that were determined to be appropriate for the FGDM program, what were the differences between cases in which families chose to participate in FGDM and those in which the families chose not to participate?

Of the families who had a family meeting, what were the differences between those who were able to develop a plan for keeping the children with their extended family and those who were unable to develop a plan?

What are the long-term outcomes of the cases that develop a plan through the FGDM program compared with FGDM cases that did not develop a plan, with cases that were referred to the FGDM program but the family chose not to have a family meeting, and referrals that were not appropriate for the FGDM program? How do these four groups of cases compare in terms of additional contact with Children's Protective Services, out-of-home placements, and long-term placement through adoption, relative guardianship or reunification?

All of the referral files were reviewed to determine the occurrence of forty case characteristics related to the children, parents, families, and types of child maltreatment. For the first three research questions, the independent variables were tested first in a bivariate analysis to see if, for example, referrals approved by the professionals were more likely to mention substance abuse. Case characteristics that were statistically significant ( $p \leq .05$ ) in the chi-square analysis were then entered into a logistical regression. Only variables that were significant in the bivariate analysis were included in the regression analysis in order to minimize multicollinearity.

## **Results**

Results of the regression analysis showed that referrals to the FGDM program were less likely to be accepted when the parents' parental rights were terminated during a previous referral to the child welfare system and were more likely to be accepted when the case mentioned special needs of the children, improper supervision, or parental substance abuse. Families were more likely to agree to try the FGDM in cases that mentioned improper supervision, special needs of the children, parental substance abuse, relatives willing to care for the children, parents' mental health concerns, homelessness, and previous involvement with the child welfare system. Families were most likely to develop a plan that kept the children with extended family and out of foster care when cases mentioned homelessness and when the family was able to develop a back-up plan for the children.

In this study, both child welfare professionals and family members independently chose to try FGDM more often in cases in which kinship was already identified, there was parental substance abuse, improper supervision was a concern, and/or the children had special needs. These findings suggest that FGDM may be a useful intervention when children have extended family members who are willing to contribute to their care and protection. When the family is willing to try FGDM, they can help with very difficult cases, such as those that involve parental substance abuse. In addition, the study found

very few case characteristics that were negatively associated with decisions to try FGDM, suggesting that FGDM can work in a wide variety of cases of child maltreatment.

This study also included an outcome analysis of the referrals received from 1996 to 1998. During this time, the FGDM program received 257 referrals, 96 of which proceeded with a family meeting. The analysis compares the outcomes after two years of the cases that held family meetings with those that did not. Overall, the cases served by the FGDM program compare favorably with those served through regular foster care services. Results show that most of the children placed through FGDM remained outside the child welfare system; however, over two thirds of the cases closed with children remaining with legal guardians who are receiving significantly less financial assistance than caregivers who are licensed for foster care or are receiving an adoption subsidy. It was also shown that children placed through regular foster care services were more likely to be adopted. Results highlight some of the benefits of FGDM and also the need to develop alternative financial supports for relative caregivers who participate in FGDM.

## **Utility for Social Work Practice**

FGDM is a new approach in child welfare that provides opportunities to identify and discuss ambiguities in child welfare cases such as parental substance abuse, improper supervision and homelessness. This study suggests that FGDM works well when it creates an opportunity for diverse participants to meet and share their concerns and suggestions in ambiguous cases of child maltreatment. However, in order for the full potential of FGDM to be realized, there is also a need to address other kinship care services, such as financial support for caregivers.

## References

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